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ABSTRACT

The zone sections of the Milwaukee "Journal" that go to the northeastern suburbs in Milwaukee County were compared with the community papers that originate in those suburbs in order to investigate the use of conflict and consensus news in zone sections. Hypotheses were constructed to test the validity of assumptions that there would be (1) more conflict news in the zone sections than in the suburban papers, (2) more consensus news in the suburban papers than in zone sections, (3) more conflict news on the front page of the zone sections than on the front page of the suburban papers, and (4) more "knowledge about" information in the zone sections than in the suburban papers. Among the findings were that zone sections used less conflict news and more consensus news than suburban papers, conflict news in suburban papers took up almost twice the space occupied by conflict news in zone sections, and zone sections provided analysis in addition to factual information for all of the conflict information they used. (HOD)

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CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

IN ZONED AND SUBURBAN NEWSPAPERS

by

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A paper presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

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Paul Salsini

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of conflict and consensus news in the zone sections of a metropolitan newspaper and in suburban newspapers. The study looked at the zone sections of The Milwaukee Journal that circulate in the northeast section of Milwaukee County and the four suburban papers that originate there. Three three-week periods over the course of a year were randomly selected for study.

Hypotheses were constructed to test the validity of assumptions that there would be more conflict news in the zone sections than in the suburban papers; that there would be more consensus news in suburban papers than in zone sections; that there would be more conflict news on the front page of the zone sections than on the front page of the suburban papers; that there would be more consensus news on the front page of the suburban papers than on the front page of the zone sections, and that there would be more "knowledge about" information in the zone sections than in the suburban papers.

The study found that zone sections could be compared with suburban papers. Furthermore, it found that there was more conflict news in suburban papers than in zone sections, and more consensus news in zone sections than in suburban papers. The study found that conflict news was more prevalant on the front pages of suburban newspapers than on the front pages of zone sections, and that consensus news was more common on the front pages of zone sections than on the front pages of suburban papers. However, the study found that there was a difference in the treatment of conflict news. Zone sections overwhelmingly used the "knowledge about" approach to coverage, offering analysis and interpretation, while suburban papers generally used the "knowledge of" approach, simply giving factual information.

When residents of Elmbrook walk down their graveled driveways to their mailboxes on Thursday mornings, they find a copy of the Elmbrook Leaves, a thick tabloid filled with news, features, photographs, announcements, reports on the activities of residents of the suburb and advertisements of local merchants.

When these same Elmbrook residents pick up the Daily News from their doorsteps on Thursday evenings, they find, in addition to the main sections of their metropolitan newspaper, a special section devoted to stories about Elmbrook and its surrounding suburbs, along with advertisements for suburban merchants.

What is happening in this mythical suburb and metropolitan area is typical of a growing newspaper situation (Hayes, 1973; Sanoff, 1982). Suburban papers are prospering, no longer the simple little shopping guides of the past. They are growing in strength financially and improving their editorial product. Some are even becoming dailies.

Meanwhile, to meet the competition, more and more big-city daily papers are establishing zone sections to attract, and keep, suburban readers (Miller, 1965; Rambo, 1982; Benenson, 1983). In some large cities, such papers as the Daily News in New York, the Los Angeles Times and the St. Petersburg Times have established daily zoned editions. Most papers, however, are zoning on a weekly basis (Benenson, 1983). The special sections are published, not coincidentally, on the same day as the suburban weeklies they are competing against.

Clearly, the battle for newspaper circulation is now occurring in the suburbs. While total circulation of metropolitan dailies in the top 50 markets declined 13 percent since 1961 (Rambo, 1982), suburban newspapers are experiencing a rapid growth: from 9 million circulation in 1965 to 18 million in 1976 to 22 million in 1982 (Benenson, 1983). Much attention has been given to the demise of such papers as the Washington Star, the Philadelphia Bulletin and the Cleveland Press, but total circulation of newspapers in 1982 averaged over one million higher than in 1981 because of the emergence of new papers, especially in the suburbs.

As its name implies, zoning is the practice in which papers send particular pages, or even a particular section of an edition to different parts of the circulation area. Zoning is not new. Miller (1965) found that the Chicago Tribune pioneered the practice in 1927, but it was slow to catch on. Only three other papers, the San Bernardino (Calif.) Sun-Telegram, the Norfolk Virginian Pilot and the Oakland Tribune, established zoned editions before 1950. Then, with the growth of suburbs and the resulting growth of suburban weekly newspapers, big-city papers turned to zoning in increasing numbers. Miller's 1965 study found 31 big dailies publishing zone editions, a 72 percent increase over 1960. No one apparently is keeping tabs on how many metropolitan papers have zoned editions now, but it is safe to say that it is a growing trend.

The zone section, in effect, is the metropolitan paper's

weekly community paper. While others in the newsroom are working on a daily deadline, zone reporters and editors for the most part are concentrating on weekly editions. Organizationally, the staff might be compared to the staff of the community papers -- say that of the Elmbrook Leaves. A single editor and a small group of reporters have the same function: to report the news of the local community.

With the structures and functions of zoned and suburban papers developing along similar lines, it is time to look at the content of the papers. There are many questions raised. Does the zone section in fact take a "softer," more community-oriented approach? Or does the approach of the metropolitan paper -- to emphasize "hard" news -- extend to the zone section? How does the approach taken by the zone section compare with that of the community papers? Are the community papers taking a harder approach? How much difference is there in the approaches? Or is there any at all?

Research Review and Derivation of Hypotheses

Researchers evidently have not studied zone sections, but they have done numerous studies on newspapers' roles in communities and on community newspapers, and that is the starting point of this study.

Research tends to support the proposition that newspapers contribute to the maintenance of the system of which they are a

part. Breed (1956) found that by expressing, dramatizing and repeating cultural patterns, the media reinforce tradition and at the same time explain new roles. Members of the society remain integrated within the socio-cultural structure, and despite the inroads of change, a body of common ultimate values remains visible as a continuing source of consensus. The media were seen as an insulating mechanism and a guarantor of consensus.

Bogart and Orenstein (1965) looked into the role of mass media and community in an urban setting and found that mass media give people a sense of identity with those who share common interests. The media, they found, define a market in a special sense, and readers look to the media that give a sense of identity with their neighbors and institutions.

Other researchers have looked into the question of identification from the readers' perspective. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1981) found that there was a consistent pattern of relationships between newspaper use and place identification; that newspaper use was linked with identification and involvement with local residential communities rather than social communities. Their findings, they said, undermine those critics who contend that newspapers devote too much coverage to local political affairs.

In another study (Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, 1979), the authors reported on a survey of 800 telephone subscribers in a Seattle area in which they found that there was a strong positive association between cognitive identification with their community and newspaper use.

Stephens (1978) found, in a survey of 960 adult residents of the metropolitan Columbia, S.C., area, that a sense of community attachment proved to be a more important determinant of newspaper reading habits than such demographic features as age, years as a resident in the community, socio-economic status, family income or attained level of education. Reflecting the studies of Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, Stephens found that newspapers could foster the reading habit in adults by emphasizing community-oriented information.

The idea of mass media maintaining stability in communities has been reinforced by numerous studies by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien. In one study (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1972), the authors discussed system maintenance in the perspective of conflict and consensus. The growing complexity of modern society, they said, has been accompanied by a tendency for communication systems to shift from a consensus approach to more of a conflict model of organization. Social conflict, however, does not necessarily indicate a state of total disorder. They proposed that conflict and tension, and their management, are fundamental aspects of modern pluralistic social organization. In today's pluralistic society, mass media are more likely to accommodate conflict in the interest of controlling it so as to perform certain functions. The authors suggested, however, that maintenance does not necessarily mean perpetuating the status quo, although that may occur. Their view was that maintenance refers to sustaining of a system and

whatever dynamic processes which it may encompass.

In another study (Tichenor, Rodenkirchen, Olien and Donohue, 1973), the authors defined social conflict as "awareness of differing public positions among interest groups or other subsystems which make up a total social system." Theoretically, they said, the relationship between conflict and total communicative activities in a system might take on any one of a number of empirical patterns, depending on the structure of the system. They suggested that a point might occur in a given system where conflict reaches such an intense and rancorous level that communication changes in form and shifts from one set of actors to another. In a maximal conflict situation, they said, communication through mass media might be restrained or shifted entirely from mass to interpersonal channels, leading to what has been called "communication breakdown" but which actually is an accommodation to the intensity of conflict.

The authors suggested that conflict should be an accelerating factor for communication until, because of the nature of the conflict and the nature of the community, tension reaches a level disruptive for that community. Beyond that inflection point, they say, the flow of mass and other formal information is likely to dissipate and resistance to formal, mass media communication is more likely to occur.

In measuring conflict, Tichenor et al. (1968) used local government stories. A newspaper was coded as containing conflict in local government if at least one article about local government,

in any one of the four editions they studied, reported opposing positions or statements of at least two persons, factions or interest groups in the community. In their most recent study (1983), the authors again used this standard, but also looked at conflict in nongovernmental settings.

Although Tichenor et al. have not published studies of consensus, they have discussed it (1973):

> A generalized feeling of pride, accomplishment and cohesion regarding a new community project might be accompanied by high levels of both mass and interpersonal communication. Conceivably, a "whole town might talk" about a new community project which every group and individual there supports. Such communication may occur where there is minimal conflict and maximal consensus about the project.

Tichenor et al. (1972) said that they had a special concern with the communication of knowledge, and said that knowledge could be thought of as fitting in one of two broad control categories, "knowledge of" and "knowledge about."

> When a message transmits "knowledge of" a topic, it is creating familiarity and acquaintance with that topic or events associated with it. The recipient gains awareness in a general way, but little more. When a message transmits "knowledge about" a topic or issue, it provides increments of formal and analytic knowledge, or what might approach understanding in depth.

The authors note that Park (1940) observed that the two categories reflected a continuum and relative characteristics, rather than discrete types. In general, they said, most mass-communicated information about public affairs tends to fall toward the "knowledge of" end of the continuum and therefore has special control properties.

> In the small community, for example, confining public affairs reporting to "knowledge of" (or what some editors refer to as "sticking to the facts") is a standard device for maintaining awareness without delving into the controversial aspects of the issues, which reporting in depth would entail.

In the same report (Tichenor et al., 1972), the authors said that media tend to reflect the social systems in which they exist in size, complexity and function. In any social system, large or small, complex or noncomplex, they proposed that system stability is a general need, and mass communication systems contribute to the maintenance of that stability. However, they said, maintenance is served in different ways, with a "consensus" approach more common in the less complex system media, and a "conflict" model more common in the more complex one.

The authors gave examples: In the small community, the community press frequently reports primarily the positive side of the courthouse, local council room and the political meeting hall. However much of a "watchdog" the community press has been historically, at least in small communities it largely watches over external forces and it appears to be an infrequent monitor over internal matters.

The authors suggested that there was little reason to expect the community press to do otherwise. Local people and local leaders did not expect it to do more, and the "gatekeepers" who edit and own the small town media are more likely to stress the community stability aspects of their functions and less likely to stress opinion leadership or arouse interest in local issues.

Using the Tichenor et al. model of conflict and consensus,

we can assume that a less complex system, such as a small community or a suburb, uses the "consensus" approach, while a more complex system -- a metropolitan area, for example -- uses a "conflict" model. The "consensus" and "conflict" models will be useful in describing and testing the role of community papers and the zone sections of a metropolitan newspaper.

Tichenor et al. have reinforced their findings with other studies. In a study of 88 newspapers in Minnesota (1968), the authors found support for the hypothesis that newspapers in small communities generally emphasize the positive side of life and avoid the reporting of conflict. The small community paper, they found, serves more of a maintenance function through the reporting of public affairs in a noncontroversial vein, in contrast with the larger community paper that, by reporting conflict, may facilitate the public dialogue necessary for resolving issues.

In a survey of the editors of the papers, the authors found that only three mentioned the "watchdog role of journalism," and only two editors referred to reporting community controversy; one of these qualified that by saying that his intent was to "put our best foot forward." The authors concluded that the study supported observations by some social scientists that the community press frequently tends to protect community institutions rather than report the disruptive side of public life.

Among others who have studied the subject, Edelstein and Schulz (1963) found similar responses when they surveyed 42

publishers of Washington papers. Asked about the newspapers' role in handling local controversial activities, barely half -- 51 percent -- agreed to the proposition that "the weekly newspaper should take the initiative in publicizing controversies."

These views support the findings reported by Janowitz (1952) in his classic and widely quoted study of 82 community newspapers in the Chicago metropolitan area:

> In a typical community newspaper, social and personal news, local voluntary associations, municipal services, and voluntary community services receive the most space in that order....The negligible amount of space devoted to crime, accidents and natural disaster is reflective of a desire to avoid the sensational approach of the daily press.

Citing what he called the middle-class orientation of the community press, Janowitz found less than five percent of the space devoted to controversy, while the overwhelming bulk of space was devoted to reports of routine activity and announcements.

Readers reflected the findings. The image of readers, he found, included the belief that the community press is an auxiliary, not a competing, news source of the daily press, and therefore tends to be viewed favorably because of its preoccupations with the details of the local community unreported in the daily press. Readers also viewed the community press as neither political nor partisan, but rather as an agent of community welfare and progress.

Werthimer (1960) also found that big-city daily and suburban papers have different functions. Metropolitan dailies, he said, represented no threat as long as the community newspapers localized important events relevant to suburbia.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study, however, was Werthimer's conclusion that a new journalism was emerging in the metropolitan fringe areas where the birth of new communities provided the marketplace for unique and lucrative newspapers. The subject was the Paddock Newspapers, 13 weekly papers in Chicago's northwestern suburbs, which were found to have both individuality and influence.

The suburban editors, he found, utilized a personalized, grass-roots intimacy with readers and sophisticated journalistic techniques; suburbia had created an audience demanding "small town" news with an urban flavor.

The suburban press was found to influence the behavior of readers, to operate as an integrating force, to define the community, to publicize its activities, to advertise its goods and services, and to serve as a public address system for local leaders. In short, the Paddocks appeared to have realized that dramatic growth in the suburbs created the need for newspapers that would stimulate interest and maintain consensus.

With the Werthimer study as particular background, we return to Tichenor et al., and emphasize their most recent study (1983). The authors had returned to the Minnesota papers they had studied in 1965. There were 83 papers when the new study was conducted in 1979; five of the papers previously studied had suspended publication.

The authors found, first, that the papers had increased their

news hole, or the space devoted to news and editorial content, by nearly three-fifths between 1965 and 1979. The increase in the size of the news hole was greater in the weeklies than in the daily or semi-weekly newspapers, and was greater in the less pluralistic regions of the state.

Local conflict reporting as a whole increased in all of the papers over the period -- from an average of 14.9 column inches per edition in 1965 to 45.2 in 1979. What may be more significant, however, is the finding that the amount of space devoted to conflict increased more in weeklies and semi-weeklies than in dailies over the period.

The figures, it should be noted, were low, and conflict reporting remains a small part of total newspaper coverage. They may, however, be important: For weeklies, the proportion of the news hole devoted to conflict reporting increased from .4 percent in 1965 to 1 percent in 1970; for semi-weeklies, the figures were .29 and .51 percent, and for dailies, .55 and .68 percent. In other words, an average weekly newspaper devoted nearly a third more space to conflict reporting than a daily paper in the final year of the study.

The results raise a serious question to the contention that daily papers devote more space to conflict than weeklies:

> Using newspaper type as the independent variable, one finds mixed support for the hypothesis that daily newspapers will report more local conflict than weeklies or semi-weeklies. There is a different pattern of conflict reporting across types of newspapers in 1979, compared with 1965. Indeed, the data indicate that weeklies have almost a four-fold increase in column inches devoted to conflict in all sectors, and in 1979 have a higher percentage of news hole devoted to conflict than dailies, a reversal of 1965.

To formulate the hypotheses for the present study, let us review what the previous research has indicated. Tichenor et al. and others have found that conflict and consensus are models for newspapers, with conflict being the model for metropolitan newspapers and consensus being the model for community newspapers. Tichenor et al. also have found that "knowledge of" and "knowledge about" are useful definitions for the communication of information. The descriptions will help in evaluating the roles played by suburban newspapers and the zone sections of metropolitan papers.

Using newspaper type -- the suburban papers and the zone sections -- as the independent variable, let us first focus on the conflict/consensus model. The conflict role, as we have seen, traditionally has been applied to big metropolitan papers. They are seen to have a "sensational approach" (Janowitz, 1952), to emphasize controversy, to report much crime news, to exploit tensions.

If that is the case, let us assume that the zone sections take the same approach to coverage as the rest of the metropolitan paper. Therefore, we can hypothesize:

H_1 The proportion of the news hole devoted to conflict will be greater in zone sections of metropolitan newspapers than in suburban newspapers.

The consensus role traditionally has been applied to the community press. It is said to seek "to maintain local consensus through the emphasis on common values rather than on the solution of conflicting values" (Janowitz, 1952). It frequently reports "primarily the positive side of the courthouse, the local council

room and the political meeting hall" (Tichenor et al., 1972).

Let us assume that suburban papers are community papers. Therefore, we can hypothesize:

H_2 The proportion of the news hole devoted to consensus will be greater in suburban newspapers than in the zone sections of metropolitan newspapers.

The front page of newspapers in the United States has traditionally been the location for the most important news of the day. If conflict news is emphasized in metropolitan newspapers, we can hypothesize that:

H_3 The front pages of zone sections of metropolitan newspapers will devote more space to conflict than the front pages of suburban papers.

On the other hand, if suburban papers are consensus-oriented, it can be assumed that they will emphasize consensus news on their front pages. Therefore, we can hypothesize:

H_4 The front pages of suburban newspapers will devote more space to consensus news than the front pages of the zone sections of metropolitan newspapers.

As Tichenor et al. (1972) have noted, news can be looked at from another perspective: "knowledge of" and "knowledge about." "Knowledge of," they said, creates familiarity and acquaintance with a topic or events associated with it, but the recipient gains little more than awareness of the subject. "Knowledge about" provides increments of formal and analytic knowledge, or what might approach understanding in depth.

If our first hypothesis holds true, the zone sections of metropolitan newspapers are more conflict-oriented than suburban

papers. Conflict news frequently requires explanation and analysis. Furthermore, metropolitan papers encourage in-depth reporting from their staffs; the staffs are more experienced than those on suburban papers.

Suburban papers, if the second hypothesis holds true, are more consensus-oriented. Consensus news often does not need explanation or analysis. In addition, the gatekeepers on suburban papers might not encourage in-depth reporting, even if it were possible considering the papers' small staffs and limited resources. As Tichenor et al. (1972) have noted, "knowledge of," rather than "knowledge about," is the standard device for the media in small communities. Therefore, we can hypothesize:

H5 Conflict stories in zone sections of metropolitan newspapers will contain more "knowledge about" material than conflict stories in suburban papers.

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, the zone sections of the Milwaukee Journal that go to the northeastern suburbs in Milwaukee County were compared with the community papers that originate in those suburbs. Zoning of the Journal started in March 1976 with a single page, published on Thursdays. Now there are three or four pages, and sometimes more, of zoned news. The local papers in these suburbs are published by Community Newspapers, Inc., a locally owned company. They are the Shorewood Herald, the Whitefish Bay Herald, the Brown Deer/Glendale Herald and the

Bayside/Fox Point/River Hills Herald.

Because it has been widely and successfully used, the Tichenor et al. method was adopted as the basic standard for measurement. The authors define it in their most recent study (1923):

> Local conflict was coded as the space devoted to reporting about manifestly different positions or statements about a public issue from at least two persons, factions or interest groups in the community. The question was not whether an article reported about a subject of controversy, but whether the article made clear that a controversy was involved and who the participants were. Coders measured the actual space devoted to controversy in column inches.

The authors further categorized conflict according to whether it involved local government. Their definition of local government was confined to legislative agencies, such as city councils and county boards, and to administrative units of those governments. Conflict was coded as "nongovernmental" if it dealt with education, law enforcement, courts, churches, business organizations, or other local bodies or groups and did not involve a local unit of government.

The author was bothered, however, that only institutional-type conflict would be measured under the model. It was decided that, borrowing from the Janowitz (1952) study, crime and accident news would be measured on a separate basis to give a somewhat broader view of conflict. Certainly crime and accidents indicate problems and tensions in a community.

Thus, there were four categories of conflict to be measured:

-- Conflict in governmental institutions.

-- Conflict in nongovernmental institutions.

-- Crime.

-- Accidents.

The following rationale was used for selecting categories for consensus stories: Consensus was defined as reflecting community unity, advancing the community or individuals, community events that promoted local harmony, and announcements of activities that fostered community spirit and unity. Thus there were also four categories for consensus stories:

-- Stories dealing with civic improvements, programs and advancements.

-- Stories reporting on the achievements of individuals and features on individuals.

-- Stories reporting on the activities of clubs and organizations.

-- Community announcements.

However, not every story in the papers -- even considering those eliminated for reasons cited below -- would fit into the conflict or consensus categories. Therefore, an "other" category also was created.

To make the content analysis analogous between the suburban papers and the zone sections, certain stories were not included. The following subjects in the suburban papers were not included because they were not zoned by the Journal: Sports, business news, food and cooking, obituaries, marriages and engagements, editorials, letters to the editor and opinion-page articles. All material on the zone pages of the zone section were included in the content

analysis except the listings for the suburban cable television stations. Photographs were not included.

To get a representative range of the papers, three periods over a year's time were randomly selected. They were three weeks of the editions of the papers in September 1983, three weeks in March 1984 and three weeks in July 1984.

The testing of the hypotheses took into account the fact that some "breaking" suburban news might be presented in the daily Journal, rather than in the weekly zone section. To determine the extent of this, a check was made of the three weeks in July 1984 that composed one of the periods under study. The check found only two stories from the seven suburbs in the main sections during that time: a 12-inch story about paving of a main street in Shorewood and a 4-inch story about rezoning for a school in Whitefish Bay. Both were on the Journal's Metro page, both could be considered consensus stories, and both could be categorized as "knowledge of," rather than "knowledge about." The check indicated that news of the suburbs was not a major factor in the daily Journal, and zone sections could be compared with suburban papers.

To test H_1 and H_2, stories in each of the zone sections and the suburban papers were numbered. The number and length of each story were recorded on coding sheets, according to their categories.

The amount of space devoted to conflict as defined by Tichenor et al. (1983) was first determined. Next, the amount of space devoted to consensus, according to the four categories, was

determined. Other stories were placed in the "other" category.

To test H_3 and H_4, the front pages of each of the suburban papers and the front pages of the zone sections were studied to determine how much of the space represented conflict stories and how much space represented consensus and other stories. This phase was done with the caution that the suburban papers, which are tabloids, often have only one or two stories on the front pages. It was also noted that the front page of the zone section makes a practice of devoting a large block of space to photographs and a long list of community announcements.

To test H_5, the conflict stories were read to determine whether they should be categorized according to the "knowledge of" or "knowledge about" theories. As noted, Tichenor et al. (1972) have suggested that in a small community it is a standard device to confine public affairs reporting to "knowledge of." Using the Tichenor et al. standard, "knowledge of" was defined as information creating familiarity and acquaintance with a topic or events, giving an awareness in a general way but little more. "Knowledge about" was defined as transmitting formal and analytic knowledge, even in-depth understanding of a topic.

For reliability, a separate evaluation of the data was done by my wife, Barbara. Her years as a reporter and copy editor gave her special ability to categorize the stories under consideration. As it turned out, our findings were remarkably similar.

In the first phase, a comparison of our separate findings showed no difference in the conflict category and no difference

for crime and accident news. There was some disagreement about story placement in the four consensus categories. The percentage of agreement, however, was high: 98 percent of the column inches in the civic improvement category; 93 percent of the column inches in the activities of individuals category; 92 percent of the column inches in the activities of organizations category, and 99 percent of the column inches in community announcements.

In the second phase, there was entire agreement on the number of conflict and consensus stories found on the front pages. There was also complete agreement in the third phase. It did not appear difficult to determine when a story simply reported the facts -- "knowledge of" -- and when it attempted to provide analytic or in-depth information -- "knowledge about."

Results

The study looked at stories totaling 19,183 column inches in the nine weeks of the newspapers. Of this total, 17,888 column inches were in the four suburban papers and 1,295 were in the zoned Accent sections of the Milwaukee Journal for the same period.

H_1 was first tested according to the Tichenor et al. (1983) standard for governmental and nongovernmental stories -- conflict was coded if there were manifestly different positions or statements about a public issue from at least two persons, factions or interest groups in the community.

Under this standard, the research found that conflict stories accounted for only 7.8 percent of the news hole in the zone sections

(1.6 percent of that was nongovernmental) and 8.5 percent of the news hole in suburban papers (.1 percent of that was nongovernmental). The difference was not statistically significant (Z = -.875, n.s., one-tailed).[1]

The null hypothesis is not rejected, and the conclusion is that there is no difference in the proportion of the news hole devoted to conflict in the zone sections of the metropolitan paper and the suburban papers.

Next, the hypothesis was tested according to the author's standard -- adding crime and accident news to the Tichenor et al. model. Crime and accident news accounted for 6 percent of the news hole of the suburban papers. When this was added to the 8.5 percent found according to the Tichenor et al. standard, a total of 14.5 percent of the news hole of the suburban papers was devoted to conflict. No accident stories were found in the zone sections, and only one 3-inch crime story was found -- a negligible amount -- and so the percentage of conflict news in the zone sections remained at 7.8 percent.

This difference is statistically significant (Z = -8.41, n.s., one-tailed).

With crime and accident news added to the Tichenor et al. standard, conflict news in suburban papers took up almost twice the space occupied by conflict news in zone sections. The figure could not have been expected.

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1. $$z = \frac{p_1 - p_2}{\sqrt{\frac{p_1 q_1}{\quad} + \frac{p_2 q_2}{\quad}}}$$

The lack of crime and accident stories in the zone sections could have resulted from either of two reasons: Crime and accidents in the suburbs could have been reported as spot news in the daily paper, rather than in the zone section, or the crime and accident news in the suburbs was not of sufficient consequence to be reported in a metropolitan paper. Considering that no crime or accident news from the seven suburbs was found in the three-week check of the daily Journal in July 1984, the second alternative seems the more likely.

The finding that suburban papers were devoting up to 14.5 percent of their news hole to conflict news reflects the newest survey by Tichenor et al. (1983), and may well be an indication of what is happening in suburban papers in general. The figure is not large; conflict news does not dominate the paper, as we will see. However, even using only the Tichenor et al. (1983) standard, the figure of 8.5 percent is considerably larger than those the Minnesota researchers found. The largest amount of conflict reporting found in their recent survey was 1 percent in weekly papers, and some of the other averages ranged down to .29 and .41 percent.

The present findings may well reflect the more urban nature of suburban papers, what Werhimer (1960) described as "small town" news with an urban flavor.

For the second hypothesis, the study found that a total of 73 percent of the news hole was devoted to consensus matters in the suburban papers. For the zone sections, a total of 77 percent of

the news hole was found to be devoted to consensus. The direction of the difference runs counter to the hypothesis, and is statistically significant ($Z = -3.82$, $p < .01$, two-tailed).

The finding of 73 percent may not be surprising for suburban papers; community papers, as we have seen from prior research, have long fostered unity and harmony in their communities. However, the figure of 77 percent -- even higher than the suburban figure -- was not expected for the zone sections.

Breaking down the consensus categories, the most dramatic figure encountered was the percentage of column inches devoted to community announcements in the suburban papers. While community papers have long been regarded as "bulletin boards" for their communities, it was interesting to find that 39 percent of the news hole of the suburban papers was devoted to such announcements. In this regard, the study supported the findings of Janowitz (1952), Edelstein and Schulz (1963) and Tichenor et al. (1968). The zone section's community announcements totaled only 17 percent. The difference is statistically significant ($Z = 15.7$, $p < .01$, two-tailed).

The Journal, however, devoted more space -- 29 percent -- to stories regarding civic improvements; the suburban papers' figure was 10 percent ($Z = 19.0$, $p < .01$, two-tailed).

The other figures were more comparable. The suburban papers devoted 14 percent of their news hole to stories about the activities of individuals, while the Journal figure was 19 percent. The difference is significant ($Z = 5.0$, $p < .01$, two-tailed).

The suburban papers devoted 10 percent of the news hole to stories about organization activities; for the Journal, the figure was 12 percent ($Z = 2.0$, $p < .05$, two-tailed).

Testing the third hypothesis, the study showed that there was more conflict news on the front pages of the suburban papers than on the front pages of the zone sections. Conflict news accounted for 19 percent of the 1,584 column inches on the front pages of the suburban papers studied. On the other hand, conflict stories accounted for only 4 percent of the 1,134 column inches on the front pages of the Journal Accent sections studied. The difference was statistically signficiant ($Z = 13.16$, $p < 0.01$, two-tailed) and counter to the hypothesis.

The difference between the suburban papers and the zone sections is in the approach taken by the papers. The suburban papers generally emphasize the news value of the stories -- what happened at this week's council or school board meeting, for example. The Journal took a more featurized or analytical approach to the events. As noted earlier, zone sections' front pages were often dominated by a picture spread and the list of community announcements.

Looking at the fourth hypothesis, the research found that stories that could be classified as consensus accounted for an average of 22 percent of the front pages of the suburban papers. The Journal's zone section, meanwhile, could claim 36 percent of front page space devoted to consensus. The 14 percentage point difference is statistically significant ($Z = -8.25$ p .01 two-tailed) and counter to the direction of the hypothesis.

We turn now to the hypothesis that looks at the content of the stories in a different way. As noted earlier, Tichenor et al. (1972) have indicated that news can be looked at from the perspective of "knowledge of" and "knowledge about," with metropolitan papers expected to contain more "knowledge about" information.

Studying only stories dealing with conflict according to the Tichenor et al. (1983) standard, the hypothesis was overwhelmingly supported. Every one of the conflict stories in the Journal's zone sections fell into the "knowledge about" category -- 100 percent of the 101 column inches of conflict stories. On the other hand, stories accounting for only 2.5 percent of the 1,334 column inches devoted to conflict in the suburban papers could fall into the "knowledge about" category. The difference is statistically significiant ($Z = 98.0$, $p < .01$ one-tailed), and the null hypothesis is rejected.

The proportion of "knowledge about" stories in the zone sections was not surprising. It could be expected that a metropolitan paper would devote more time to analysis. Even though much of the zone section staff worked part-time, they were in an environment that encouraged investigation and interpretation of events. Furthermore, the metropolitan paper may well have known that the suburban papers would be "reporting the facts." It was apparently the desire of the big-city paper to give the suburban readers more than they could find in their local papers.

Discussion

The author believes that these are the significant findings in this study:

1. Zone sections can be classified as community newspapers. Using only the conflict/consensus model, the research has found that they use less conflict news and more consensus news than suburban papers. Although some differences were found between the zone sections and the suburban papers, the similarities were more remarkable.

2. Local community papers in the suburbs are more conflict-oriented than might have been expected from previous research. According to the findings of H_1, conflict news in suburban papers took up almost twice the space occupied by conflict news in zone sections. The results would seem to indicate that suburban newspapers are no longer simply "bulletin boards" -- although there is a large amount of space devoted to announcements -- or papers that run "nice" stories about local residents. They are covering the controversies in their communities.

3. For all of the similarity between zone sections and suburban papers according to the conflict/consensus model, there is a major difference in the way the papers provide conflict information. The study found the zone sections providing analysis for all of the conflict information they used; in other words, "knowledge about."

In this, the zone sections may be considered extensions of the metropolitan paper, which routinely takes the analytical approach to its news coverage. Although both have the same weekly deadlines,

the metropolitan paper has the staff, and the resources, to dig deeper into stories than the suburban papers. The research indicated that the suburban papers take a different approach: telling the facts but not analyzing the information. Almost all of the stories in the suburban papers could be classified in the "knowledge of" category.

While the finding is considered significant, more research needs to be done in this area. Others have studied reporters' and editors' roles in the community press, and research should be conducted comparing the staffs of zone sections and suburban papers. There is a likelihood that the metropolitan papers pay higher salaries and therefore attract more experienced staff members. Suburban papers, on the other hand, may be staffed by reporters and editors with less experience.

Experience of the staff is only one factor, however. Perhaps the suburban press still does try to avoid controversy. As Tichenor et al. (1972) had noted, reporting "knowledge of" is a standard device "for maintaining awareness without delving into the controversial aspects of the issues, which reporting in depth would entail." Perhaps the papers are avoiding more in-depth analysis because that would foster controversy in the community. Perhaps the reporting of conflict is one step in the development of suburban papers, and providing "knowledge about" is the next step. These are merely speculations, however, and subject to further research.

In addition, there is an issue related to any study of conflict and consensus news in papers that serve the suburbs: The growing

criticism among newspaper observers regarding what they see as an attempt by some newspapers to turn their backs on their own cities in looking to the suburbs.

For example, the executive editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, Michael Massing (1982), found this to be the case in New York, where the Daily News attempted to gain suburban readers through a trendy "Tonight" edition; in Hartford, Conn., where the Courant went after readers in affluent suburbs with more features and trend stories, and in St. Louis, where it was found that the Post Dispatch was featuring more stories designed to attract suburban readers and "the severe problems of the city of St. Louis are being increasingly neglected."

Newspaper critic Ben H. Badikian (1978) has made this same point. In indictments of metropolitan papers, he has declared that the emphasis on the suburbs has resulted in blackouts of news to the central city. He has accused the papers of sending to the suburbs news of only the most violent events of the city. He has found newspapers catering to advertisers who want affluent readers. The papers, he says, are neglecting both the news and the residents of the central city. If true, that approach directly relates to newspaper zoning. There are far-ranging theoretical and practical consequences that must be considered.

First, there is the question of whether zoning helps to separate suburb from suburb -- and worse, suburbs from central city. Readers certainly are aware that they are getting news of their own communities but not news of other sections of the metropolitan area.

A case in point was described in the Milwaukee Journal in February 1977, less than a year after zoning was begun (Runge, 1977). A subscriber wrote to the reader contact editor complaining that a story about improved conditions in an inner city high school had been published only in the central city zone, not in the suburban zone sections. Previous stories about problems in the school, however, had been in all editions of the paper.

That can be an example of what could happen under zoning; conflict news gets in all editions, consensus news is zoned. The situation seems particularly crucial for the central city vs. the suburbs. It can be expected that news of crime, of controversy, of conflict, will get in all editions. Yet when there are stories dealing with improved relationships or of new programs to benefit the city, only central city residents may get to see them.

Or suppose that a south side suburb is involved in many controversies. The stories get in all editions of the metropolitan paper, yet stories dealing with improvements in the suburb get only in the south side zone edition.

On a broader level, suppose that the entire metropolitan area is considering resolution of a problem, perhaps school segregation. A proposal for metropolitan-wide integration has been made, and the suburbs, as well as the central city, are studying it. Yet suburban residents read only, or mostly, news of conflict in central city schools where integration already is in effect. They may not be able to read of the gains made by integration.

What may well be happening here is the conflict/consensus model at work. In providing consensus news of a suburb to the suburb, the zone section is fostering the kind of community feeling that Tichenor et al. have described. In addition, the consensus feeling of the community may well be reinforced with the presentation of conflict news from another community. When residents of a community read of the "bad" things happening in other communities in their area, they may well feel better about their own community and have negative feelings about the others. That is speculative at this point, and in need of further research.

A related question for further research is whether conflict outside a community can help stabilize the community. As Tichenor et al. (1973) have pointed out, conflict can be a stabilizing force within a community, but researchers evidently have not looked at the question of the effect of conflict outside a community.

Besides the theoretical questions, there are practical and social questions raised by the present research that call for further study. They deal particularly with zoning. However much zoning may be regarded by newspapers as a means to attract more suburban readers, zone sections cannot simply be regarded as a way to fight off suburban weeklies. The consequences for the metropolitan area must be considered.

We have seen that zone sections send particular news to particular sections of the metropolitan area. In doing that, newspapers must ask the question if the lack of information about

other areas causes incomplete, or even negative, perceptions about the other areas. The newspapers also must consider the kinds of news they are presenting in the zone sections: What is the result of presenting conflict news, but not consensus news, of the central city in the main sections? What is the result of presenting consensus news of the suburbs in the zone sections? The results of the present study are tentative, but may lead in the direction posed by these questions.

Lack of information may cause a breakdown of communication. If that is the case in a metropolitan area, what effect does that have on relationships between residents and their ability to work together to solve mutual problems? Finally, there is the ultimate question: Can zoning, in fact, become a devisive element in a metropolitan area? Does parceling out only specific information from one area to another, and from the suburbs and the central city, lead to buttressing the walls that separate the central city and the suburbs?

Obviously, these questions range far from the topic of this research, which simply looked at aspects of coverage of zone sections and suburban newspapers. Research must start somewhere, however, and it was the hope of this author that the present study would spur further investigation of the roles -- and the results -- of newspaper zoning.

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